

You Didn't Build That Ezra 6:14-22

While he was campaigning in 2012, Barack Obama infuriated entrepreneurs when he said, "If you've got a business, you didn't build that." Given the context, and given his general interest in an increased role for the government in all areas of life, he was probably trying to say that because business owners benefit from things the government pays for, such as roads and public schools and police departments, they should be happy to pay more taxes. But regardless of your politics, there's a theological truth behind those words, a truth that today's passage underlines. For if the people of God were celebrating the work they had done to complete the Temple, at the same time they knew they didn't really deserve to get the credit for it. In short, they knew they hadn't really built the Temple, at least not by themselves.

Look for example at the end of verse 17 – the people offered a sin offering of 12 goats, one for each of the tribes of Israel. What's that about? How is confession of sin part of rejoicing at a job well-done? So why would they express their need for God's forgiveness at this otherwise happy moment?

Well, after studying the book of Ezra up to this point, we know, don't we? After all, since the offering was said to be for all 12 tribes, for all the people of God everywhere, it would include those people who stayed behind in Babylon instead of making the trip back to Jerusalem to help with the reconstruction efforts – they needed some forgiveness, didn't they? And what about those who had returned, but who had started building fancy houses for themselves instead of building God's house first – might they feel a little bit guilty about the 16 year delay in the project, the time between when they finished the foundation and when they finished the rest of the Temple? Might they have something they needed to confess?

So, sure, when they thought about how they had to have not one but two prophets of God to accuse them and encourage them to get back on track, they knew that even on the day when the Temple was finished, they had no room for pride. Instead confession was the order of the day.

And so was a humble attitude about what it was that they had achieved. Yes, the first part of verse 17 tells us about all the animals they offered as part of the dedication service: 100 bulls and 200 rams and 400 lambs. Now, that sounds impressive until you compare it with what King Solomon had offered when the First Temple had been dedicated so many years before: 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. Yes, the people had completed the Second Temple, but compared to the golden magnificence of the First Temple, it was no great shakes. Indeed, compared to the situation of God's people before the exile, they were pitifully few in number and just as lacking in wealth. And to make matters worse, they were powerless – they had no king like Solomon to lead their celebrations because they were ruled by the pagan Persian empire. Yes, the people had much more reason for humility than for pride.

And that kind of confession and humility is good for all of us to keep in mind, even when we celebrate our achievements, whatever they may be. Now, sometimes we rejoice as a group, as many of you did after finishing the renovation of this building in the early 1990's. On another occasion, I remember when we celebrated our bicentennial in 2007 with the unveiling of a magnolia marker out at Point Lookout and hosting a Presbytery meeting and throwing a birthday party for Mr. Daniels. It's encouraging to mark important milestones, to look back on a job well done.

Of course, there are individual achievements as well – degrees finished, businesses built, children who have gone on to have successful families and careers of their own. And it's a good thing to celebrate all these things. But while we do that, it's also a good thing to remember that the best of our efforts have been tarnished by sinful motives. For let's face it – along with all of our accomplishments are so many words we wish we could take back, so many deeds we wish we could undo, so many regrets about things left undone. So if we would be completely honest with ourselves, and if we would avoid the sin of pride and self-congratulation, we need to be careful to give God the glory for our achievements, to thank God for His grace whenever we remember what He has allowed sinners like us to accomplish.

And isn't that what the people in this passage did? After all, they knew good and well that Obama's infamous quote really was true in their case: God really was the One Who was responsible for the Temple being rebuilt. For what do we read in the very last verse of today's passage? It says that God was the One Who had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them. That means it was God Who had allowed Cyrus to conquer both Assyria and Babylon, and thus to reverse the resettlement programs of those earlier empires. And it was God Who had moved Cyrus to permit the people not just to return to their homeland, but to rebuild the Temple – and even to provide the funding for them to finish the job. They knew they didn't have the power or influence or wealth necessary to have accomplished any of those things, but they knew God did. And so their celebration was rooted not just in confession and humility, but in acknowledgment of their weakness and dependence.

And Jesus made the same point to His disciples in our responsive reading, didn't He? "I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing." We are just branches, helpless unless we are connected to the Vine. Unless the Spirit of Christ flows through us, we can't bear any fruit, we can't build anything for Him.

And what kind of fruit did Jesus tell His disciples to bear? The fruit of obedience to His commandment of love. In the same way, the people in today's passage were careful in all their celebrations to make sure that they obeyed God in everything they did. That's why they offered whatever sacrifices they could afford – they wanted to give God the best that they could. That's why they set the priests and the Levites to do the work that the Law of Moses had appointed for them to do, and that King David and King Solomon had organized so long ago. And that's why they began to observe all the festivals prescribed in the Scriptures, beginning with the Passover that we'll examine in more detail next week.

But even in that Passover celebration there was an important note of humility, wasn't there? After all, the Passover was for them a remembrance that God was the One Who had brought their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt. It was a remembrance that God by His grace had spared their firstborn children even while all the firstborn in Egypt of both people and animals had died in a terrible plague. All God asked them to do was to kill a lamb and put its blood on the outside of their houses – a public sign of their helplessness, of their faith in God in the midst of a terrible situation.

And of course we know the ultimate reality to which that sign pointed, don't we? We know that on the cross of Calvary, God would slay His own firstborn, His only Son, the Lamb of God so that we might be brought out of bondage to sin and death. We know that it is only by God's gracious provision of a perfect sacrifice for us that we are saved from the punishment that all our sins deserve.

And yet we also know that it is possible to combine a recognition of our own sin and our own weakness with rejoicing in the providence and grace of God. Because Jesus didn't just die on the cross. No, He walked out of His tomb on the third day, and so we can be sure that His sacrifice was accepted, and thus that all who trust in Him are forgiven and free. We know that in the resurrection of Christ, God has given us every reason for rejoicing both in new life today, and in resurrection life with Him forever.

And we see that same truth in the last verse of today's passage, for it says that the Lord had made them joyful. Weak and sinful though they were, halting and humble though their efforts had been, God in His grace and mercy had given them a reason to rejoice, a reason to sing His praise, a reason to celebrate.

Brothers and sisters, no matter what we have done, no matter what we have left undone, Jesus laid down His life for us because He loves us. And He continues to build His Temple, His very body of living stones, of all those throughout space and time who trust Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord. So let us rejoice in the fruit He has allowed us to bear. Let us rejoice in what He has allowed us to do with the lives He has given us, with the lives He has redeemed. But let us rejoice most of all that He has drawn us to Himself and made us His own.